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Universal Congress on the Panama Canal

Report of the Secretary-General

I. Introduction

1. The present report is submitted pursuant to General Assembly resolution 51/5 of 24 October 1996 on the Universal Congress on the Panama Canal. The report covers information available prior to the holding of the Congress at Panama City from 7 to 10 September 1997. In the resolution, the Assembly took note of the report of the Secretary-General on the item (A/51/281), reiterated its firm support for the initiative of the Government of Panama and urged it to continue to intensify its efforts to organize the Congress; renewed its appeal to Member States to assist the Government of Panama and called upon intergovernmental and non-governmental organizations to do likewise; and urged the competent organs, programmes and specialized agencies of the United Nations system to make every effort to provide assistance from within existing resources for the holding of the Congress.

2. Governments as well as the private sector of user countries of the Panama Canal showed great interest in the Universal Congress on the Panama Canal. The Congress was seen as an opportunity for user countries and the private sector to meet with the administrators of the Panama Canal and to ensure confidence in the change in stewardship and in the legal and administrative regime of the future. It was also expected to enable users to understand the operations of the Panama Canal, in particular its physical capacity.

3. The "Panama 2000 Encounter", organized by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in 1996, led to the signing of a declaration by all participants to commit themselves to the conservation of the ecology of the Interoceanic Region, that would guarantee the continued sustainability of the Panama Canal (see A/51/281, annex II). Participants in the Encounter also committed to the exclusion of sectoral and partisan interests from decisions related to the Canal.

4. Promotional visits by Congress organizers included meetings at the highest level with government authorities, shipowners, cargo owners, export and import associations, port authorities and academic institutions. Those consultations helped to design a programme for the Congress that covered issues of interest to users and would give participants the opportunity to raise questions, request clarifications and make suggestions. The Congress was expected to address issues relating to diplomatic relations between the Government of Panama and other Canal user countries. Another issue to be taken up was the construction of a third set of locks, which, because of the magnitude of the project, would require a multinational effort by all countries that include the Panama Canal in their transportation and external commerce infrastructure.

II. Finances

5. The European Union has contributed 1,166,000 European currency units (ECUs), of which ECU 400,000 are intended to fund a study to be presented to the Congress of

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short, medium and long-term (to the year 2060) traffic forecasts; ECU 366,000 are for the purchase of equipment and materials; and ECU 400,000 are for the Panama Canal Museum, to be inaugurated during the Congress.

6. At the time of writing of the present report, there was a deficit of approximately $500,000 needed to finance the Congress.

III. Promotional activities

7. In addition to visits to several countries, 20,000 postcards were sent to the international shipping community and to Governments, announcing the Congress, and brochures have been distributed in both English and Spanish. Major maritime organizations have been involved in the promotional activities, including the International Association of Dry Cargo Shipowners, Baltic Exchange Limited, the International Chamber of Shipping, the Greek Maritime Cooperation Organization, the International Association of Independent Tanker Owners, the Japan Shipowners' Association and the Hong Kong Shipowners' Association. The ports of Houston, Miami, New Orleans and New York also participated. The Panama Canal Commission signed a cooperation agreement with the Organizing Committee of the Congress and, locally, the Panama Maritime Chamber and the Panamanian Association of Maritime Law have joined in the promotion.

8. Invitees to the Congress included the 20 Presidents and Heads of Governments of the countries that have a vested interest in the Congress, as well as their Ministers of Transportation, External Commerce and Maritime Affairs.

IV. Programme

9. The Congress agenda included panels on the transition and beyond, the Canal in the twenty-first century, investment opportunities and Panamanian maritime sector policies. It was to conclude with a Forum for Users.